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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**NATIONAL INTERESTS AND NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY:  
SETTING THE RIGHT PRIORITIES**

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A National Security Strategy For A New Century, the Clinton Administration's 1997 national security strategy statement to Congress, is remarkable in that it embraces a wide range of competing national interests deemed as "vital" An obvious fault in this strategy statement is that it tries to acknowledge each and every interest across the domestic and international political spectrum, while failing to properly identify those that are truly vital More so, it fails to elucidate a clear and concise national strategy to deal with them The critical national interests that have been at the core of our nation's success and lasting durability – enhancing physical security, bolstering U S economic prosperity, and promoting democracy abroad are appropriately covered <sup>1</sup>

There is, however, a lack of meaningful suggestions on how to achieve the plethora of ends desired There is no discernable plan that ties all the "ends" together with the appropriate "means" to achieve those ends In essence, the plan set forth is one of "reactive" or "just in time" diplomacy that has failed to take a hard look at the resources (means) in which to accomplish national goals (ends)

National interests, as defined by the Clinton administration, fall into three categories First, *vital interests*, are those of broad overriding importance to the survival of the safety and vitality of our nation, second, *important national interests*, are those that do not affect our national well being and safety, but could affect our well being and the character of the world in which we live, and third, *humanitarian interests*, are those that are values based (humanitarian actions and gross violations of human rights) <sup>2</sup> An inherent flaw in the Administration's strategy is that it struggles to define what interests

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<sup>1</sup> A National Security Strategy For a New Century, 1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid , 9

are vital, important, and humanitarian, and how to differentiate between competing interests in a prioritized manner that could achieve the end states desired

The inverse manner in which the Administration prioritizes the threats to our interests cover a wide range of options – transnational events (terrorism, drug trafficking, international organized crime, environmental and security concerns), smaller scale contingencies (humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, disaster relief, no-fly zones, reinforcing allies, limited strikes, and interventions), and major theater warfare (North Korea and Iraq) The strategy clearly states the requirement for our military to be able to fight and win major theater wars in two distinct areas simultaneously while additionally embarking upon a course of major modernization and evolution of military science Use of diplomacy, international assistance, arms control, and nonproliferation options are discussed, but the fact is the Administration's only consistent approach for achieving national security strategy goals are economic diplomacy and the military, the latter primarily as a 9-1-1 or deterrence tool

The means to counter the threats described end up as an incoherent strategy advocating an idealistic/moralist version of statecraft (transnationalism/collective security), while relying upon realism/real-politick means (geopolitics/balance of power) as an ace card to ensure the attainment of our vital national interests The confusing menu of tools (means) and end states described in the Crises Response section appears to be an attempt at establishing a United States led "New World Order". Despite all its idealistic rhetoric, the Administration fails to establish a coherent vision and plan on how to achieve its goals, instead retreating to old tried and true methods of statecraft (balance of power) if desired courses of diplomacy fail

Vital national interests, as defined in the strategy statement, are those of “broad, overriding importance to the survival, safety and vitality of our nation”<sup>3</sup> The Clinton Administration’s plan, however, abuses and enlarges the definition of vital national interests to the point that the definition between vital, important and humanitarian interests <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ so blurred, every thing, when dependent upon a policy of reactive diplomacy, is a vital national interest. If a nation-state has infinite resources (means), it could then embark upon a strategy that every interest is vital. That is not the case today, and any strategy that fails to differentiate between what is essential to our survival, safety and vitality and what is not, risks wasting limited resources on dubious foreign policy initiatives and entanglements.

The Clinton Administration needs to reassess and prioritize the nation’s vital interests and take a look at the end states desired. It also needs to look at how the accomplishment of those end states relates to our prioritized interests (coherency), and then assess if the means (resources) are available to achieve the nation’s vital interests. Constant reevaluation of the thrust of United States foreign policy in support of national interests is required as conditions across the globe change, while vital interests change slowly, in fact, one could say that our vital interests have not changed over the past 220 years. Our vital interests are the same today as in Washington’s and Jefferson’s time – survival, safety and vitality of the nation.

The gist of the Clinton administration’s national strategy is to improve the international and domestic environments (both politically and economically), increase reliance upon collective security agreements, and further internationalist policies. Idealist in nature, the Administration has proved to be particularly astute in reacting to realist-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid , 9

based domestic political opinion. Fortunately, the Administration has rebuffed the adherents of neo-isolationism, but it has failed to state a convincing case for internationalism and collective security strategies, primarily because of domestic economic and political reasons.

Two advocates of a more focussed strategy have recently commented on this aspect of national security. A strategy of selective involvement, as espoused by James Schlesinger, advocates retrenchment in U.S. foreign policy, stating the United States “must learn, in this altered context in which there are no major rivals, to husband its strength and to choose with care those policy objectives” so “they can garner the public support to sustain them in the long run.”<sup>4</sup> Selective involvement resembles isolationism, advocating international leadership in those issues that threaten our vital interests. Simplistic in nature, it essentially is a strategy of pragmatic isolationism that is as unfocused as the Clinton Administration’s strategy.

David Abshire’s proposal for an “agile strategy” takes Schlesinger’s policy of selective involvement much further, and in that effort, distances it from an isolationist label, making it a more effective national security strategy for the United States than the one espoused by the Clinton Administration. Abshire’s agile strategy calls “for the use of power and the achievement of peace” and “demands in American thinking and action, a new flexibility and nimbleness, the ability to move quickly to take advantage of new opportunities or head off rapidly emerging dangers, and guiding it all, a keen long-range vision.”<sup>5</sup> An agile strategy has at its core that “a single-minded, linear strategy like containment is no longer appropriate. America needs an approach to the world that is

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Foreign Policies, 205

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Global Policy: Toward an Agile Strategy, 41

consistent with its tradition of leadership and respects its vital national interests, but that also builds for U S leaders unprecedented freedom of action and innovation in meeting the challenges of a new era ”<sup>6</sup>

An agile strategy brings with it the ability to break the U S leadership’s habit of using interventionist solutions for the problems of the world, and more so, requires an in-depth, critical review of what our vital interests truly are The redefinition of our truly vital interests would return our strategic thinking and national strategy to a more realistic, affordable, yet proactive plan We would have to reevaluate the assumptions of our position in the international arena, with the pillars of our foreign policy and national strategy based upon a strong domestic economy, a strong defense posture based on actual military needs (not congressional dictates), and limitations to intervention in foreign affairs based on clear criteria <sup>7</sup>

An agile strategy would bring a strong dose of badly needed realism to the execution of our national strategy, since we cannot adopt or afford the resolution of all the world’s problems It does allow, however, a mechanism for international leadership, intervention and the furthering of our nation’s values throughout the world, under clearly defined criteria In a time of scarce resources, increasing numbers of liberal-democratic governments, relative world harmony, and burgeoning global trade, the United States can still assert itself as the world’s leader by remaining committed to the truly substantive and vital national interests that have traditionally been the key to its success as a nation-state security and safety of its people and borders, prosperity at home and abroad, and promotion of our values throughout the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid , 45

<sup>7</sup> Ibid , 47

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